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Allestimenti temporanei per il recupero: una “pre-azione”

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L'abbandono dei borghi antichi e la riduzione del senso di comunità che li caratterizzava, rendono urgente ripensare forme e pratiche che possano riaccendere l'interesse verso i luoghi stessi, il loro patrimonio edificato e la loro possibile riattivazione. Discipline come l'allestimento e l'arte ambientale, che si occupano di creare installazioni sperimentali e temporanee nell'ambiente costruito, risultano essere di grande interesse per il ruolo che potrebbero assumere in questa direzione.

La realizzazione di piccole architetture o di installazioni artistiche effimere è, per sua natura, un'azione “leggera”, di costo contenuto e reversibile. Rappresenta, quindi, una modalità d'intervento più facilmente perseguibile e realizzabile rispetto ad un consueto processo di pianificazione e recupero. Si potrebbe definire, in un'unica parola, una “pre-azione”. Una pre-azione che ha come scopo quello di riportare all'attenzione un'urgenza più ampia, che richiede interventi più lunghi e complessi.

Negli ultimi anni, sia in ambito nazionale che internazionale, le azioni temporanee sul patrimonio storico costruito, degradato o in abbandono, si stanno ampiamente diffondendo.

L'obiettivo di questo contributo è quello di individuarne i tratti comuni, le eventuali criticità e gli esiti, ai fini di delineare dei possibili scenari in cui l'azione temporanea possa essere strumento utile di azione preliminare e di sensibilizzazione sui temi di valorizzazione e recupero architettonico e ambientale.

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Temporary set-ups for recovering built heritage: a “pre-action”

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Our reasoning is built up on four key concepts: Temporary use, Participation, Set-up, and Hamlet. These concepts, which are difficult to isolate from one another, have boundaries which often merge or intersect, to give rise to the ways of the action we aim to analyse.

The temporary use of spaces, both urban and otherwise, today represents an increasingly efficient way to reactivate places without an identity or that have been abandoned, “in between” as they are defined¹ and we have become used to their presence in our cities.

What distinguishes the idea of the temporary use from every other form of territorial planning, is to consider the problem of abandonment, disuse and oblivion of a place as an opportunity to give impetus to its subsequent transformations: “vacancy as a resource”².

1. We assume the definition of spaces “in between” in the meaning that Aldo Van Eyck gives to them. According to him Spaces “in between” are places of opportunities to construct projects. This same definition is used by Manuel Bailo in his book *Public Catalyst*, in the chapter dedicated to urban playground where he compares the work on public spaces carried out by Van Eyck in Amsterdam and by Oriol Bohigas in Barcelona (BAILO 2015, p. 105).

2. In dealing with temporary intervention in urban space the basic assumption is to consider “vacancy as a resource”. This concept coincides with the title of a chapter of the book *Urban Catalyst - The power of temporary use* (OSWALT, OVERMEYER, MISSELWITZ 2013, p. 52). This chapter begins as follows: “Every temporary use has its starting point in empty buildings and disused sites that go unused for some period of time, whether shorter or longer”.

The experiences of temporary use initially came into being as spontaneous processes, often isolated but, from the very beginning, they showed their potential as drivers of activating long-term transformations.

In the same way, their study was not systemized until the early years of the new millennium, when the research “Urban Catalyst Strategies for Temporary Users”³ constructed an organic system of reflections and analysis on the experience of temporary use in our cities.

The terms that most interest us here can be distilled from this research.

Temporary use

Temporary use is flexible, dynamic and adaptable. It is not based on images or preconceived references, but freely captures the “spirit of the places” on which it acts and transforms them into the strong point of their activation. This is why it can influence the quality in the future and permanent set ups (fig. 1).

Temporary use is experimental.

The limited duration in time makes them a privileged place for experimentation, implementation of informal practices which cannot be proposed in more traditional forms of action.

Temporary use is inexpensive, it does not require large initial economic investments because it does not have high costs of construction and occupation, but privileges light work that can be implemented and replaced. The capital necessary to promote action of temporary use of a place, is not of an economic nature, but is social and cultural capital.

Temporary use is “free from law”. The first experiences of this kind have often been carried out illegally, outside legal or legislative references. Today, the initial phases of these processes still often take place “spontaneously”, without checking the legal and administrative situation that regulates the place of the action. Only later, when the temporary practice is consolidated to become permanent, does measuring up to the institutions and laws come into play.

Temporary use is fast, but encourages gradual developments. It does not require long processes of planning or the subsequent long processes of implementation. It comes from a strong desire for change and from an idea and, thanks to the initial will of an active group of people who share it, it is implemented. Fast at the beginning, it instils in the places drivers of activation that produce the transformation more gradually.

3. OSWALT, OVERMEYER, MISSELWITZ 2013.



Figure 1. Dolceacqua, Imperia (Italy), “Aforismi di luce”, Eugenio Andrighetto 2017. The discovery of a place can also pass through a very short duration experience, even of just a few days, but that is able to attract the attention and evoke new possible scenarios (graphic elaboration by the authors).

Temporary use is not risky. It is immune to the economic and social risks that the large and drastic operations of change can entail. Temporary use works with light actions, slight and gradual changes, which accompany the transformation.

Temporary use is inclusive and necessarily requires a mixture of people and activities. It is generally promoted by “out of the box” entrepreneurs, who see the possibility of implementing an idea, a socio-cultural project in which to invest their resources, of whatever kind they are, to produce new experimental models of life. Their bond can only be of intense collaboration, of mutual help and professional cooperation.

Temporary use is socially versatile and is able to capture the occasions of social change as a driver of the action. The communities we live in are new, socially and culturally diversified, in which different components have to learn to coexist and that of thinking a “new” place together can be one of the possible chances.

«Global and local processes, migration, industrial restructuring, and other economic shifts produce social re-territorialisation at all levels. Residents with new histories, cultures, and demands appear in the city disrupting the given categories of social life and urban space»⁴.

Temporary use combines methods from top and from bottom.

The experiences of temporary use of places show us how this can only take place by combining actions from the bottom and from the top.

The actions from the bottom are those of the spontaneous and unplanned kind, but capable of producing that catalytic effect which, like a spark, triggers off the process of change. Those from the top, on the other hand, are more structured, concern larger projects and intervene in the phases after their implementation.

The former cannot survive with the others if the project is able to evolve in time and continue on a permanent basis. The latter need the lightness of the former to keep a high rate of interest and the effectiveness of their impact.

Temporary use acts specifically. It creates new public spaces like magnets, capable of catalysing interests and reactions.

They are specific interventions which often act on a micro-scale to then spread their action. Urban Catalyst and Jesko Fezer⁵ refer to the concept of acupuncture, a balancing and regulating therapy in

4. *Ivi*, p. 154.

5. «Acupuncture is a balancing and regulating Therapy in traditional Chinese medicine [...]. With a few pinpricks, the energy flow of the whole body is meant to be put back into balance. Analogous to this, architects and artists understand small interventions as acupuncture when their effect reaches far the local intervention»; *Ivi*, p. 176.

Chinese traditional medicine which, by acting on single points diffuses the flow of energy throughout the entire body.

Temporary use is multilayer and “makes of necessity a virtue”. As a light action of a limited length of time it does not violently invade the places where it acts, but tends to conserve their original state, their aura and their historical character. It acts rather by overlaying and keep the historical stratification of the places alive.

Temporary use is an “unfinished” project.

Manuel Bailo resumes the concept of Van Eyck of “transparent time”⁶ In The interior of time Van Eyck writes «When the past is gathered in the present and the emergent body of the experience finds its place in the head, the present acquires a temporary depth, it loses its instantaneous acidity, and its razor cut quality. We could say that time is internalized or it becomes transparent. Inside my head I see the past, the present and the future as active continuing. If it is not like this, the appliances that we do would be empty of temporary density, of association capacity».

The temporary project is therefore an unfinished project, to be thought of as “in progress”.

Those who act by temporary actions must be able to introject an open idea of the temporal, unfinished, idea.

Participation

Participation is defined «in general, as the fact of taking part in some form of activity, both simply with one’s presence, one’s agreement, with a direct interest, and by making an effective contribution to carrying out the activity»⁷ (fig. 2).

In the context of interest to us, participation is seen as the direct involvement of people, residents or interested, in the conception first and then in the physical construction of the new collective spaces.

Initially appearing as the spontaneous process of illegal occupation of places, we can think of the experience of squatters⁸ active participation in the project of spaces of our cities has gradually become institutionalized. From the 1970s, with the complicity of owners and enlightened administrators, the residents or users were formally involved in the urban planning processes.

6. VAN EYCK 1970; BAILO 2015, p. 98.

7. Definition taken from TRECCANI 2017 and here freely translated by the authors.

8. BAILEY 2017.



Figure 2. Sao Paulo, Brasil, *Luz nas Vuelas*, Boamistura 2011. The Madrid collective Boa Mistura gives their dignity back to places being abandoned or in conditions of serious degradation by painting on buildings and roads (graphic elaboration by the authors).

Every participated action has its “starting point” in the colonization of a space or an unused or abandoned building, with an uncertain present and an undefined future.

From the very beginning, participation in the physical transformation of the “in between” places went on an equal footing with the experiences, also avant-garde, of participated art. Or it has even found in artistic action the means or the initial impulse to implement this transformation.

«Art thematises spaces, comments in them, and changes them. In the best case, it defines and creates new places»⁹.

Neglected places are seen as alternatives to the conventional spaces of art, but above all as occasions of exploration and experimentation.

“Site-specific” operations are of increasing interest, conceived and produced for a specific place, as without its environmental conditions, it would not have any meaning.

In the experiences of temporary use, art, architecture and urban planning go hand in hand and mix their instruments of action in the interest of the success of the project and of the effectiveness of its diffusion.

The question of participation in the creation of the “urban fact” has been extensively dealt with by Manuel Esteve Bailo in the study *Public Catalyst*¹⁰ who provides particularly interesting interpretations and approaches to the subject.

On the one hand, he gives great value to the previous reflections on temporary use and on the value of transitory nature in the construction of the public space, on the other, he puts the focus on the activities, the trades, the exchanges and the “minor” actions capable of transforming it.

He concentrates on recognizing minimal actions, customs and habits, the economic activities, the traditions, the apparently “insignificant” things capable of provoking a reactivation. He reflects on every human action that, through images, sensations, gestures, impulses, is capable of influencing change.

Human action, as we have already said, can be of the spontaneous kind or channelled into a planned project which needs the active participation of people in order to be carried out.

9. Claudia Büttner devotes an entire chapter titled "Art within the urban realm: on analysis and intervention, temporary users and co-creators" to the contribution that, since the 1970s, the artistic avant-garde gave to the artistic experience through the participation of the user. This modality, starting from art, was then extended to other areas, including, in particular, those of action on urban space; OSWALT, OVERMEYER, MISSELWITZ 2013, p. 139.

10. In his book, Manuel Bailo gives an interesting quote by Manuel Delgado according to which «The street, this field where the nature of every urban thing ends up accomplished, made of shining sparks and ephemeral focal points»; DELGADO 1993, p. 183; BAILO 2015, p.25.

In this sense, in our cities, it is possible today to trace an increasingly close-knit map of actions of the participated type which are having a discreet, but effective, impact on the creation of spaces of quality from disadvantaged conditions.

In each of the contexts in which the participatory process becomes a way of implementing a project, it is necessary for all the players involved to agree on the objectives, the methods of implementation and the resources available.

Equally crucial is the work of diffusing the results and of “contamination” that the experience itself can generate, by transforming the individual case into a replicable “precedent”, even with the due differences.

Set-up

The set-up is that discipline which, in the field of an architectural project, introduces the dimension of temporality (fig. 3).

Often associated with actions on a small scale, the set-up allows exploring ways of action which are otherwise denied by the need for long-term planning, huge investments and lasting creations.

This is why it draws its instruments from adjacent worlds such as those of art, graphics, multimedia etc. The set-up is, by definition, experimental.

The construction materials are light, easy to assemble, inexpensive and even degradable.

In an action in the built-up historical part, thanks to its light way of action, it can create installations which respect the existing context, its aura. And fall within the idea of stratification of the historical phases of the place, each one visible.

The set-up explores the places in which it acts, studies them, seeks their identity and, discreetly, reveals them.

A project of set-up, even though of short duration, can be so strong as to suggest and stimulate new “visions” which can indicate a possible path for the future of a given place. When this place is a place “in danger”, full of history, but forgotten, the spark between the ephemeral and the preciousness of the context to be preserved, can trigger off extremely interesting processes.

Spaces are moulded and transformed, even though for a short time, under the effect of the “site specific” installation or set-up. New ways of use and new qualities are glimpsed which a subsequent action of recovery would be able to offer.



Figure 3. Favara, Agrigento (Italy), *Farm Cultural Park* (since 2010). Favara, a small Sicilian village, has reinvented itself as an artistic and cultural center, thanks to the involvement of the whole community that participates in the creation of a new identity and a new idea of the future (graphic elaboration by the authors).

The more the set-up is of the participated kind, i.e. able to involve a large number of people both in the creative process and in the productive one, the more it is effective. And it is, above all, capable of transferring into the concrete physical space the “sense of place”, i.e. the sensation of welcome and sharing that only the human action is capable of producing.

Hamlet

From the very beginning, the temporary use of spaces has been associated and experimented in urban contexts, often in marginalized spaces of the contemporary city (fig. 4).

It has done so through light actions, with minimal investments and easy to implement, capable of activating inert, empty or forgotten places.

The results produced by these experiences also encourage their application in contexts of semi-urbanity.

It is useful here, to start off again from the traditional definition of hamlet, understood as an inhabited centre of small or medium size or importance¹¹, originally the extension of the city outside its ancient walls.

Hamlets are agglomerations of homes around collective spaces such as squares, streets, public buildings, surrounded by a natural context in part agricultural, with a strong community identity and a tendency towards self-sufficiency and commercial trade with the surrounding area.

Today, many of these characteristics no longer exist and life in the hamlet has gone into crisis.

The inhabitants abandon them, attracted by occasions and lifestyles that are more in line with the dominant idea of modernity.

The question that interests us does not only concern the inevitable deterioration of built-up heritage, but the loss of that dynamic system of relations and ways of life that living in the hamlet produced, in a word, its identity.

We cannot say that important actions of protection of the historical heritage have not been implemented. Perhaps they have only been carried out insufficiently and traditionally, with the consequent “effort” of time and bureaucracy, and often with poorly effective results.

The institutional action for protection acts on the material of the buildings, securitizes the places, consolidates walls, reconnects the infrastructures, but is unlikely to be able to reactivate life, in the sense of the social dynamics, of the places.

11. Definition taken from the Dizionario della lingua italiana, Treccani 2017 and here freely translated by the authors.



Figure 4. Riace, Reggio Calabria (Italy), *Riace in festival* (since 1998). Riace's experience tells of the reactivation of an ancient village thanks to the process of inclusion of new inhabitants from different parts of the world (graphic elaboration by the authors).

For this reason, thinking of associating the historical value and the originality of a hamlet with the temporary project may represent a new path for its reactivation.

Through a new use, even though temporary, the hamlet can become a magnet and a catalyst of activity.

It can redefine its identity through new uses and the relations that its inhabitants, old and new, will be able to establish.

The temporary use, set up in a light way in the historical context, can be the spark that stimulates its rebirth.

As already stated, there have not been many experiences in this sense, but they have been very encouraging.

Often they are not exclusively of the architectonic type, but use a mixture of expressive forms with diversified results and this is why they are even more stimulating.

This is not the place for their systematic analysis, but it definitely is the place to outline the ways to interpret them.

The interpretation is the one mentioned several times of the transitory nature and the power of the transitory nature in the reactivation of places.

It is not enough to highlight the physical character of the physical space, but the activities, the businesses and the gestures of the people able to reactivate it have to be highlighted. The minimal actions, the customs and habits, the traditions, the ambitions and the apparently insignificant activities capable of bringing about the transformation have to be identified.

Our attempt, in conclusion, is to outline a possible path on how to act or, better, start to act, for the reactivation of abandoned historical contexts. For this reason and due to the characteristics that we have highlighted, it is natural to speak of pre-action. That is, a preliminary action which has as its aim that of bringing back attention to a wider urgency, which requires longer and more complex actions.

The point that this type of action has in common is that of strongly referring to the places in which they are carried out, places with a strong historical and environmental identity, to be rediscovered and reinvented.

Acting ephemerally on them, putting them to the test and reinterpreting them is a way to show their preciousness, intrinsic qualities and potential.

The spaces are moulded and transformed, even though for a short time, under the effect of the site-specific installation or set-up. New ways of use and new qualities can be glimpsed which a subsequent action of recovery could develop in the long term and in more stable forms.

The pre-action is the spark, the social reactivation and the protection of the built heritage, the result of the evolution of the experience.

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